DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 049 336 UD 011 433

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TITLE The Natural History of American Black - White Relations: A Question of Structural Persistence.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Southern Anthropological Society, Dallas, Texas, April 1-3, 1971

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS American History, Anthropology, Black Community, Caucasians, *Community Study, Economic Factors, Negroes, Negro History, Negro Institutions, *Negro Leadership, *Race Relations, Racial Segregation, Slavery, *Social Structure, *Southern States

ABSTRACT

The focus of this paper is on the Piedmont and Tidewater regions of the American South. Traditional social patterns tend to be used as models as long as they serve the community's purposes. In the community of slave and planter in ante-bellum Tidewater Southern U.S.A., a group of privileged blacks known generally as house servants came to function as links between the planters and the majority of slaves. Having their status and privilege defined only by white whim and favor, and behaving properly lest their demeanor infuriate the planter, these blacks assimilated and internalized white attitudes, behavior, and beliefs. Under post-emancipation Jim Crow, there are two racially segregated communities with the white group dominant both socially and economically. However, given the large numbers of potentially powerful and influential blacks, and the need for black services in maintaining the economic enterprises of the system, whites had to establish lines of communication with the black community. A group of individual black brokers has mediated between the effectively segregated racial groups. These black brokers may be understood as the product of ante-bellum social structure. Their position also is based on status rather than contract. (Author/JM)

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The Natural History of American Black - White Relations:

A Question of Structural Persistence

A paper presented to

The Southern Anthropological Society

Dallas, Texas, 1971

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UD011433

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ABSTRACT

It is proposed that the master-slave relationship patterns of interaction, deference and settlement established under the "peculiar institution" of American chattel slavery have persisted with some modification to define and delineate the structural relationships of rural deep South blacks and whites today. Focus will be on the Piedmont and Tidewater regions of the American South, with the communities of this environment seen as the basic units of organization and transmission of both structure (social form) and process (patterned-behavior) within a society. It is proposed that we should look at these southern communities, from their slavery inception to their present condition of black-white equilibrium, as an ongoing process and not as a state of being.

According to Arensberg and Kimball (1965) the settlement pattern and social structure of the Tidewater South was focused on the countycourt-plantation complex. Distributed a days ride from the court house were the aristocratic big houses surrounded on the lean lands by poor white yeoman farmers and free blacks. Slavery, Anglicanism, Methodism, Bourbonism, and Saturdays 'round the square all served to illuminate the rhythm of Southern life.

Yet nowhere do we find a structural explanation that accounts for the peculiar variety of American Chattel slavery. It is contended that we cannot selectively focus upon an arbitrary cluster of traits such as the early burst of British capitalism and its need for expendable manpower, Anglicanism versus Catholicism, or the lack of British tradition and legal experience in dealing with forced labor to account for this unique master

slave relationship pattern. We must look rather at that consellation of Old World social structure brought to the colonies, and view the New World social institutions as complexes which contain and direct material change. Both material and social imperatives must be noted if we are to adequately assess British and American slavery and the post-emancipation modifications.

Britain experienced an early commercial capitalism burst. Following the 1670's white redemptionist and yeoman farmer labor was insufficient to staff the, in theory, mercantilist enterprizes that fed the growing industrial and market centers of Birmingham and Liverpool. The prestigious and influencial planter class needed large numbers of expendable laborers. The West African black and the Triangular trade satisfied planter and industrialist both. Yet it is too much to attribute British and American chattel slavery to materialism alone. Evidence from Hispano-Portuguese colonies of the same period, and, their current racial color class system should reflect upon this.

Unlike the metropolitan home government orientation of the southern European colonies, Britain's New World administration was distinctly local in character. Nowhere do we find an imperial bureaucracy composed of councils, Vice Royalties, Audiencias, career bureaucrats, and cabildos concerned with world environment, legal tradition, state religion, and social justice. We find rather a local government composed of appointed and elected planters, united in the general assembly and county court house, headed by an ineffectual governor appointed by a feeble subcommission of the Privy Council. Local colonial considerations were primary, not home government social experiments or "quests for justice". Had Britain had a tradition of slavery and social mechanisms to assure some human rights for its black labor force it is doubtful,

given the nature of colonial rule, that traditions could ever have become operationalized. No effective home government lines penetrated the colonies.

Nor was there an imperial staff of conquerers accompanied by priests, treasurers, military officials, and other guardians of royal interests involved in the conquest of the Anglo-Saxon New World. We find a relatively disinterested, or better, financial interested, weak and nearly bankrupt Stuart government delegating the colonization of the New World to Trading Companies and shareholding individuals of the mercantile class. The Individual became the sole connecting link between colony and metropolis.

Materialism and unbridled local interests were vented through another weak colonial institution. Unlike the well developed, powerful, bureaucratic Catholic church of Spain, Britain's New World religious institutions were the Anglican church with its locally elected planter vestry and the parishioner based Protestant Congregationalist sects.

Royal appointed officials in church, government, and commerce were few and ineffectual. With a metropolitan hierarchy ephemeral at best, American slavery suffered from a marked lack of standardization which resulted most often in free wheeling chattel slavery.

Master slave relationships seemed to have based on status and privilege rather than contract and institutionalized dictums. In the absence of assurances of baptism, rights to permanent marriage, access to legal machinery, time off for individual enterprize, and stipulated regulations regarding purchase of freedom, (all presided over by a scared and imperial bureaucracy) one finds British courts and assemblies defining the slave as chattel in perpetual servitude.

In this community of slave and planter it is my task to look at black channels of communication and upward mobility. Accounts of manumitted slaves are available, but one is left ignorant of the mechanisms involved in this infrequent process. Black white interaction is obscure.

Between the planter big house and the field hand slave quarters there existed a privileged group of blacks known generally as house servants. If recast in terms of Goffman's (1963) asylums model this group of mammies, concubines, stable hands, house servants, and shoemakers can be seen as the "trustees" in a staff-inmate relationship. In a group of people cut off from society and living a formally administered way of life this middle group of privileged inmates were the respectable and well liked Negroes who served as the links or pipelines between blacks and whites. Having their status and privilege defined only by white whim and favor, and behaving properly lest their demeanor infuriate the planter, these blacks assimilated and internalized white attitudes, behavior, and beliefs. Elkins (1963) notes that this middle range group were the few blacks considered possessing a personality. A "Sambo Syndrome" is offered to account for the behavior of field hands.

In a very selective patron-client relationship, the lines and structural links of communication between races were many and complex; based ultimately on one's "personalism" with a strategic white. With the white initiating all interaction the definition of the intermediary black's structural position was precarious indeed. The black could only react with submissive oblique suggestions, and, offered deference to the white's demeanor.

Traditional social patterns tend to be used as models as long as they serve the community's purposes, and even longer if the people believe that they do

not critically interfere with the solution of basic practical problems. Once institutionalized and embedded in the social structure and symbol system of the group, the fundamental patterns of a culture tend to persist. If outlawed they tend to go underground and re-emerge in slightly changed form when the circumstances are more auspicious.

What we find under post-emancipation Jim Crow are two racially segregated communities with the white group dominant in terms of finance, privilege, prestige, and access to resources. However, given the large numbers of potentially powerful and influential blacks, and the need for black services in maintaining the economic enterprizes of the system whites had to establish lines of communication with the black community.

Although not so visibly and intensely today as perhaps a decade ago, blacks are still excluded from white group pastimes and gathering places. What I believe we find, much as in slavery days, are a group of individual black brokers who articulate the effectively segregated racial groups, yet no longer as inmates and staff. Further modifications on the Jim Crow prototype should be interesting and will be noted further on.

Given this, we can look at the community as the minimal grouping of personnel that can support the biogram and who are ordered in a table of organization through which survival is assured and the content of the culture is passed onto the next generation. It is the structure or form of the community which is in process and which in its unfolding through the generations allows cultural modification within a given matrix of social structure.

The traditional division of labor in the rural deep South is so organized as to necessitate the joint participation of whites and blacks if both are to

survive. The social structure is so arranged as to make the black almost always subordinate and the white superordinate in the participation. It is the system of inter-racial structural links and incumbent reciprocal rights and obligations which for different reasons on each side of the relationship makes the relationship sufficiently satisfactory to both sides to keep the system in a moving equilibrium. Interaction between blacks and whites, however, is either avoided or ritualized. Encounters are held to a minimum, are regularized, and are standardized with each participant realizing his obligations and expectations.

Interaction between deep South rural whites and blacks is usually held at the local level. One can discover in the works of Hylan Lewis (1955), John Dollard (1949), Saint Claire Drake (1962), and others, the concept of "pipelines", that select group of blacks who act as the articulating links between the black and white groups. Through the vehicle of these "respectable and well liked Negroes" and through periodic ritualized encounters black white relationships are held in a moving equilibrium with white culture containing, restraining,and encouraging certain variations in meaning and emphasis within black culture.

It is suggested that these black brokers are the product of ante-bellum social structure and are the present day "trustees" or middle range Negroes who structurally articulate the groups. Note should be taken that much like their slavery day predecessors their position is based on status rather than contract. Should they fall from grace by engaging in what Lewis (1955) calls the "whiskey-sex-law complex" or fails to treat the white properly, the patron can voluntarily withdraw his support.

Lack of institutionalized communication between blacks and whites in the rural deep South precludes the development of effective corporate group organization on behalf of the blacks. What we find again are selected members of the black community, who based on their proper deference, demeanor, and emulation of white behavior patterns are selected as black community representatives. Domestics, concubines, preachers, teachers, undertakers, and respectables defined in terms of these vague and renuous white expectation criteria fill the bill.

One could profitably use Turner's (1969) concept of ritual as the key to the social structure and the subsequent use of symbols, space, order of entry, point in time, locale (stage setting), and order of interaction in analyzing and measuring the intensity, frequency, and duration of black white encounters. Within a ritual context one could view the meetings of laborers and professionals, consumers and suppliers, lawbreakers and police, teachers and supervisors, clients and patrons, selected females and selected males, and, tenant farmers and landlords as encounters serving to reinforce the social structure. Rights and privileges are wielded consciously and voluntarily by the white. Within this cultural matrix a person may become so involved in the maintenance of the social rules that he tends to become committed to a particular image of himself.

The most frequent and intense links holding the community together are largely local in structure. Though societal wide integration is incipient in black politicans, pressure groups, and corporations, traditional integration has been through the vehicle of individual relationships.

Perhaps focus on a work recruitment ritual would serve to clarify the point. The white has license to enter a black sanctuary (bar, pool room, street corner, church, or home) and initiate interaction. Black respondents react with proper deference reflected in their linguistic behavior, gestural conduct, use of space, and structure of their reaction (order, frequency, intensity, and duration of their interaction). The reverse would not occur. Although he may submissively suggest, at no time does a black assume an "A" role in the "A/C" relationship.

From this structure a sentiment of expectations and obligations is engendered which delimits and defines white black behavior. Each participant carries about a social roadmap, which when situationally followed allows a precariously based moving community equilibrium. It should be noted that rural deep South social structure and sentiment was equipped to handle periodic outbursts of violence in the form of lynchings and shootings before national protest put an end to it. Tubulance does not necessarily throw a system out of homeostatis.

It is still a relationship of tenuous status rather than contrast. Blacks must react with passive accommodation or lose the favor of their white patrons. Within this structural arrangement black clients seek economic favor, legal indulgence, and social privilege for themselves and the black community. However, much like the master slave relationship the structural links remain uninstitutionalized and based on the whim of the white.

Lewis (1955) notes that in a "tough" culture where the culture's paths make for difficult tension reduction one finds abortive, incongruous, and impulsive aggression outlets. Since accommodation is the expected form of

behavior exhibited towards whites, black aggression is often unleased upon the ingroup. What we may discover is a very sensitive black group that can be cultivated by the white to keep it fractionalized and disorganized. It is at this juncture that the white can most effectively employ his singular black client rather than a black association or corporate group of blacks which would be potentially autonomous and competitive.

From one point of view, traditional rural deep South black culture, in continual processional adjustment to white culture, is superficially distorted. This possibility may make for the rise and persistence of orientations and habits that appear incongruous with value objectives. Substitution of less direct and conventional channels of goal achievement, in the form of white patrons,may be selected for.

This racial situation does not fit M. G. Smith's model of the "plural society". Smith would content that differences in institutional cultural content preclude inter-racial or "inter-segment" communication and interaction. What he offers is a society composed of discrete cultural compartments dominated by a superordinate sector.

What we have in the deep South are a series of communities assymetrically integrated in favor of the white at the local level, with no mechanisms specifically developed to integrate society at higher societal levels. Each local black community tends to be a fractionalized "minimal" segment uninvolved in larger ongoing black society.

To illuminate the variations of inter-segment communication, I would recommend noting Despres' (1969) concept of "broker institutions" which articulate groups at the bureaucratic level in the wider sphere of social

activity. If we had "maximal segments" articulated at the affectively neutral bureaucratic level, each segment would possess an autonomous organization capable of constituting a corporate group structured enough to preform society wide collective activities.

Broker institutions in the form of market activities, collectives, unions, educational offices, political organizations, and government representatives would make for a more competitive black white relationship. Pressure groups such as the NAACP reflect this broader power base movement. At no time does society wide action preclude local interaction.

The point of this paper has been an attempt to suggest that in the traditional rural deep South the structure and form of black white relationships has remained virtually unchanged. Anthropologists hould look deeper than functional studies concerned with slices of time and cultural content.

Though the obvious changes within the black community have been the development of society wide interest groups, a profitable course of inquiry might be a further look at modifications made upon the Jim Crow pattern. Whitten and Szwed's (1971) recent publication notes that blacks are increasingly turning in upon the black community at the local level for their means of viability and mobility. Rather than relying on white patrons we find blacks are organizing very flexible kin or fictive kin based labor groups and temporary associations in their attempt to exploit the economic environment. These black extended households, networks, quasi-gruops, and action sets are the minimal groupings, without the aid of white patrons, the black use as nodes of social and economic capital.

With the black community turning in upon itself at both the local and

upper societal levels, we may find a modification of the traditional pattern of racial segregation. Rather than a fractionalized black community held together by individual black white relationships we may be witnessing a consolidation of black power.

By using a community studies model which gives temporal depth to a study, one can focus on the community as it contains a basic minimum of personnel who in their activities and relationships engage with others in events in which it is possible to discern the order of action, and hence the structure of the system. From this, one can observe the functions that activities and inter-relationships possess, both in contributing to the maintenance of group relationships and in the extent to which modification effects the system.

Behavior which is ritually structured in space and time by the distribution of personnel engaging in their ordered activities and interactions with others constitute the conditions that give the rural deep South community its "peculiar" characteristics. The preferred relationship pattern and social structure persists in many guises to re-emerge in slightly changed form through time.

SUMMARY

Much of this paper has been based on speculation. It is not meant to be a factual or theoretical contribution, but merely a series of questions one might profitably ask of culture history and functionalism when doing a community study in a "plural society".

The author has questioned the plausibility of the structural persistence of black white relationships since slavery days. Can the black white dyadic

tie and the role of the individual middle range Negro as cultural broker be seen as the result of structural forms that existed well before emancipation? If these structural relationships and cultural processes are the components of Jim Crow, what then are further questions we may ask?

Also, have ecological changes influenced black-white interaction patterns? With the development of a black yeomanry in the piedmont area, rather than the plantation tidewater, we might look at the changed relationships to the gentry there as well.

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